

GULL LAKE RESERVOIR DAM
Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs
Lake Shore Vicinity
Cass County
Minnesota

HAER No. MN-70

HAER
MINN
11-LKSHOV,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

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Gull Lake Reservoir Dam

I. Introduction

Location: Gull Lake, Lake Shore Vicinity, Cass County,
Minnesota

QUAD: Gull Lake Quadrangle

UTM: N5140390, E395980

Date of
Construction: 1910-1912

Present Owner: St. Paul District, U.S. Army Corps of
Engineers

Present Use: Flood Control, Recreation, Natural Resources
Management

Significance: The Gull Lake Reservoir Dam is one of
six Mississippi River Headwaters dam sites
that are historically significant because of
their association with commerce, tourism, the
Ojibway Indians, and U.S. Indian policy in
Minnesota in the late 19th century.

By providing a consistent flow of water
throughout the navigation season, the
Gull Lake Dam enhanced navigation and
contributed to the commercial development of
the Upper Mississippi River and the
surrounding region. The Headwaters
Reservoirs project precipitated a century-
long conflict between the tribe and the U.S.
government over the issue of damages
resulting from the inundation of tribal lands
and property.

Historian: Dr. Jane Lamm Carroll
St. Paul District
U.S. Army, Corps of Engineers

II. HISTORY

The Gull Lake Dam is the most southern of the six reservoirs in the Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs system (HAER No. MN-64). Located on the Gull River about one-half mile below the outlet of Gull Lake in Cass County, the dam site is 168 river miles above St. Paul. The total drainage area above the dam is 287 square miles.¹

Built in 1912, the Gull Lake Dam was the closest dam to the Twin Cities and the last dam the Corps constructed as part of the Mississippi Headwaters Reservoirs project. Gull Lake had been proposed as one of the original reservoirs dam sites. However, by 1887, the Corps decided the cost of damages at Gull would be excessive because of the numerous logging dams on the Gull River and its tributaries and high real estate values.² After John S. Pillsbury, of the St. Anthony Falls Water Power Company, provided the land and flowage rights for the government to build the Gull Lake Dam, Congress authorized the construction of a concrete dam in 1907.³

Unlike the previous Headwaters dams, no timber structure preceded the concrete dam at Gull Lake. Colonel Francis R. Shunk and George Freeman, who designed Lock and Dam # 1 at the Twin Cities, then under construction, also designed the Gull Dam. The Corps constructed the dikes of concrete curtain wall and earth fill. The left bank dike is 129 feet long with 90 feet of curtain wall. The right bank dike is 72 feet long with 33 feet

of curtain wall. The control structure is reinforced concrete supported on timber piling. Five sluiceways are five-feet wide and are controlled by stop logs. The dam also includes a five-foot fishway and an 11-foot log sluice. The dam supports an eight-foot roadway.⁴

A 1920 map of the Gull Lake Dam Site shows 14 structures on the rise above the western bank of the Gull River. Only the dam tender's house, the entrance to a root house, and the boat house survive. The original complex also included the following structures: an office, a wood shed, a barn, a warehouse, a carpenter shop, a blacksmith shop, and out house, a corn crib, an ice house, a smoke house, a root house and a chicken coop. The barn, warehouse and shops were covered with corrugated metal. The three-room office dated from 1912 and was finished with cement stucco on metal lath.⁵

Historical Significance of the Gull Lake Dam Site

As the sixth in the system of Headwaters Dams, the Gull Lake Dam is significant for its contribution to the improvement of navigation on the Upper Mississippi River and its impact on regional commerce. As is evident in Pillsbury's donation of the land for the Gull Lake Dam, the water power and milling companies at St. Anthony Falls believed the Gull Dam, because of its proximity to the Twin Cities, would increase the flow of the Upper Mississippi significantly beyond the contributions of the

other five reservoirs.

Brainerd, the lumber town closest to Gull Lake, became a vacation center in the early 1900s. During the 1910s several large resorts and hotels were built on the lake. By 1915, there were about 50 private cottages on the lake as well.⁶ During the 1920s tourists came in increasing numbers to the area. The Gull Lake Dam itself also attracted fishermen and tourists. Unlike the other dam sites, the construction of Gull Lake Dam occurred concomitantly with the settlement of the surrounding region.

Gull Lake had been the site of a permanent Ojibway village during most of the 19th century. The American Fur Company established a trading post at the village in the 1830s and Methodists founded a mission there in the 1840s.⁷ During that period, the United States Indian Agent, Lawrence Taliaferro, considered the Gull Lake village a significant Ojibway center. An 1855 treaty with the U.S. established a reservation at Gull Lake for the tribe. Subsequently, despite numerous government efforts to remove the Ojibway from the Gull Lake area, many Indians remained. As late as 1889, about 277 Ojibway were still living at Gull Lake. According to the Rice Commission's report, these remaining Ojibway all signed the 1889 agreement to move to one of the northern Minnesota reservations.⁸ As most of the Ojibway who had formerly lived at Gull Lake had moved away by the time the Corps built the Gull Dam in 1912, the issue of damages did not arise.

1. Carole Zellie, "Upper Mississippi Headwaters Reservoirs Damsites Cultural Resources Investigation," Report prepared for the St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers, 1988, p.105.
2. Annual Report, 1887, p.1671.
3. Annual Report, 1910, p.1803; Kane, p.159.
4. Zellie, pp.105-106.
5. Zellie, p.114.
6. Carl Zapffe, Brainerd (Minneapolis: Colwell Press, 1946), p.108.
7. James P. Schell, In the Ojibway Country (Walhalla, North Dakota: Charles H. Lee, 1911), pp.114-115.
8. See Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoirs, HAER No. MN-64; 51 Congress, supra, p.4.